

# “When We Remix...We Remake!!!”

## Reflections on Collaborative Ethnography, The New Digital Ethic, and Test Prep

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*ABSTRACT: This article describes two very different projects undertaken in the same basic writing course: collaborative ethnography and ACT test prep. At first glance, it appears that the work on collaborative ethnography accomplished our goal of creating better, more self-conscious writers while the work on test prep achieved our goal of creating better written products: essays that pass the standardized test. However, that interpretation ignores the powerful interaction between these two elements of the course and how each served as the context of the other.*

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According to science-fiction novelist William Gibson, “We live at a peculiar juncture, one in which the record (an object) and the recombinant (a process) still, however briefly, coexist.” Gibson’s remark is oddly relevant for the basic writing courses I teach, where my training in process-oriented pedagogy finds an uneasy coexistence with standardized testing (the ACT Writing Exam, a 60-minute pencil-and-paper test that is meant to test students’ ability to write a college-level essay). Inspired by composition scholars like Jeff Rice and Rebecca Moore Howard, I try to foster an environment for collaborative, dialogic, experimental writing. On the other hand, inspired largely by the urgent requests of students to “tell me how to pass” the ACT and the temptations to teach “practical,” traditional strategies that my students believe will help them to pass in the academy, I teach to the test—in a way.

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This article stems from some slightly experimental reading material I used in the classroom when I was a graduate teaching assistant. I liked bringing in statements about students and their writing from internet message boards and writing instructor list-serves. “Look what they’re saying about you!” I’d say to the composition students, and that is about as far as the gesture usually went. In the fall of 2006, I decided to push the practice further in the basic writing course I was teaching, asking students to read texts from the field of composition studies so that they could “eavesdrop” on the conversations that are happening about them.

This seemed like a good idea for a number of reasons:

- Texts from the field of composition tend to be chock-full of claims about writing, claims about students, notions about what writing is, useful ways of thinking about writing, and misconceptions about writing.
- I thought it might be possible, using these texts as a springboard, to teach students to become writing teachers so that they can teach themselves and each other.
- Graduate students in composition like myself can learn more about the field by talking about it with our own students and reading what students write about various topics in composition.
- Composition studies isn’t any less suitable as a topic for Freshman Composition or Basic Writing than, say, gender or blogging or fashion or any of the other elements of our culture that are often studied and written about by students.
- Students will feel more comfortable questioning the instruction they receive in composition classes if they see that scholars also habitually question this instruction.

With these thoughts in mind, I chose five texts, somewhat haphazardly, from the field of composition, including Donald Murray’s “Teach Writing as a Process Not a Product” and James Porter’s “Intertextuality and the Discourse Community.” My plan was to look at them with students in class, see if students learned anything about writing from them, and ask them to write essays in response to them.

As we looked at these texts, and as I began to consider creating a paper about the experience for the composition studies class I was taking with Rebecca Mlynarczyk at the CUNY Graduate Center, I started thinking about

some ethnographic practices that I learned about while studying anthropology as an undergraduate. Ethnographers, I recalled, often practice what is called “collaborative ethnography,” in which the people being researched work side by side with professional anthropologists in creating the research project, carrying it out, and writing it up. More and more, ethnographers consider it their duty to present their texts and interpretations to the people being studied so that they can contribute to the interpretation process and the knowledge that is created in the field. With this in mind, I asked students to help me write the paper that was due in the class I was enrolled in instead of creating their own individual essays.

Anthropology’s move toward collaborative ethnography is, in my mind, part of the general move toward recombinant texts that Gibson talks about in “God’s Little Toys: Confessions of a Cut & Paste Artist.” Gibson’s article, featured in a recent issue of *Wired* magazine devoted to the concept of remix, discusses the ubiquity of remix in twenty-first-century culture. Gibson mentions “the whole metastasized library of Dean Scream remixes, genre-warping fan fiction from the universes of *Star Trek* or *Buffy* or (more satisfying by far) both at once, the JarJar-less *Phantom Edit* (sound of an audience voting with its fingers), brand-hybrid athletic shoes, gleefully transgressive logo jumping.” The direction we are heading is clear, according to Gibson—documents of the future will be explicitly unstable, unfixed, open.

For this reason, musician Brian Eno claims that sampling—the selection and arrangement of previous work—is a key to agency now more than ever:

The importance of this cannot be overstated: in an era of information overload, the art of remixing and sampling as practiced by hiphop DJs and producers points to ways of working with information on higher levels of organization, pulling together the efforts of others into a multilayered multireferential whole which is much more than the sum of its parts.

If agency lies more in selection and arrangement at higher levels of organization, we are doing a disservice to basic writers by enforcing curricula that deal primarily or exclusively with lower levels of organization—the selection and arrangement of what might be called “fine granules” of text: words and letters and phrases and punctuation and then perhaps paragraphs.

Curricula dealing with these lower levels of organization are very common in basic writing courses. They emerge from what Ann Del Principe calls “the linear narrative”:

The linear narrative of writing ability is a story of how writers learn; it goes like this: individual writers begin to write by marking letters, then words, then phrases, then sentences, and then small compositions down on paper. Once writers can write sentences and small compositions correctly, they can move on to more complex skills, such as paragraphing. Having mastered paragraphing, they can move on to writing descriptions and personal narratives. Then, slowly but surely, they can make their way to analysis and research. In this narrative, abilities are acquired sequentially, in what is believed to be a logical, building-block order. Abilities build on preceding abilities, the simpler coming first, the more complex following. (65)

One of the problems with the linear narrative is that research in composition studies does not support it (Del Principe 70-73). Armed with this knowledge, in a basic writing course I taught at CUNY’s New York City College of Technology in the fall of 2006, we often “worked backwards,” skirting, rushing past, or skipping the so-called pre-writing and drafting stages, zeroing in on the selection and arrangement of *coarse* granules of text, a process more often associated with revision. In order to fast-forward to what is sometimes understood as the penultimate stage of the writing process, we needed to treat the writing of those in the class and others outside the classroom as our own pre-writing, as our own drafts. In other words, we practiced the remix. Or should we call it “found writing”? Collage? Ready-made writing? Plagiarism?

By manipulating other composers’ texts, students enter the conversations that those texts are a part of. As Jeff Rice writes in his discussion of remix, “Through the process of juxtaposing the samples, the student locates her own position within the various cultural, ideological, economic, racial, gendered, etc., discussions consistently taking place around her” (468). Once a student gains access to these conversations, particularly academic ones, she and her mentor may find “potential spaces” to, in the words of Harry Denny, “develop a relationship with academic writing, not by necessarily conforming (to) or resisting conventions, but by mutually exploring creative ways to experiment and play” (55).

Our interest in sampling was compatible with two very different projects we undertook: (1) collaborative ethnography and (2) ACT Writing Exam preparation. By turning to sampling and remix, my aims as an instructor—to build better writers and to research writing situations—and my students’ oft-declared interest—ACT practice—merged. The split between test prep

and more innovative, more process-oriented pedagogy faded. Students' goals, instructors' goals, English department goals, and government goals harmonized. (If only it were that easy.)

### **Collaborative Ethnography: Including Student Voices in Composition Studies**

In EG 090: Developmental Writing, in the fall of 2006, one or two days per week were devoted to collaborative ethnography, “an approach to ethnography that deliberately and explicitly emphasizes collaboration at every point in the ethnographic process, without veiling it—from project conceptualization, to fieldwork, and, especially, through the writing process” (Lassiter, *Chicago Guide* 16). Instead of building short essays on their own “from scratch,” students participated in and consulted on all stages of the creation of a fifteen-page paper due in the composition studies class I was enrolled in as a doctoral student. Students (from here on referred to as “consultants”) joined me in the planning, research, drafting, and arrangement of what came to be this section of this article. Our desired outcome was a work that—quoting Eno again—“pull(s) together the efforts of” each other “into a multilayered multireferential whole which is much more than the sum of its parts.”

I should mention right off that, despite students' mostly successful engagement with the composition studies texts we read and responded to and their mostly enthusiastic collaboration, I was not able to relinquish control of the product to the degree that is necessary for something to be called a fully collaborative ethnography. At some point during the project, I independently decided that the text would attempt to weave together three ideas relevant to composition studies: intertextuality, collaborative ethnography, and digital composition. I don't think my consultants would have been able to budge me from this position, which I find intellectually exciting. Additionally, I may have fallen into a trap described by Eric Luke Lassiter in “Collaborative Ethnography and Public Anthropology.” “Simply put,” he writes, “doing collaborative ethnography—really doing it, with consultants directing the text's content—brings little prestige, power, and authority for academics who depend on prestige, power, and authority for their growing careers” (102). In other words, a thoroughly collaborative composition rewards no particular person, and I did want credit for this work as my final project for the graduate course.

In response to my concerns, Donslow Brown, a consultant, advised me

not to be "so self-conscious." In fact, most of the consultants, who agreed to have their names and their writing used in this project, disagreed with my contention that I exercised too much control over this piece, pointing out correctly that they played a large role in the construction of the text, through, among other things, class discussion, letters they wrote to James Porter in response to his article "Intertextuality and the Discourse Community," their suggestions of texts to examine intertextually, their extensive feedback in the margins of the outline that I created, and their rearrangements of the paper's sections. They also helped create the reading list necessary to be conversant in the topics we were writing about. Early on, for example, consultant Victor De La Rosa recommended that I bring in texts from the field of anthropology that explain collaborative ethnography.

Our goal as a class was to answer Nancy DeJoy's call for students to participate in and contribute to discussions happening in composition studies. DeJoy's *Process This: Undergraduate Writing in Composition Studies* applauds theorists (like her mentor James Berlin) who encourage students to participate in and contribute to their culture instead of merely consuming and adapting to it (DeJoy 51). However, she claims these theorists encourage participation in and contribution to nearly every conversation except for the ones happening in composition studies. Consequently, there is no challenge to the prevailing "top down" model, in which composition theorists develop pedagogies, heuristics, and textbooks that students are expected to consume passively (13). For example, composition students and composition teachers might use Patricia Bizzell's *Negotiating Difference* reader without engaging with the meandering theoretical path that Bizzell traveled en route to the conclusions that prompted the creation of the reader. Instead, students are required to take it on faith that, yes, literacy *is* about negotiating difference and move forward from there.

DeJoy isn't the only composition scholar who has called for the inclusion of student voices in composition studies. Writing in 1991 about public school language education, Keith Gilyard points out that students' voices are "conspicuously absent" from discussions about "this problem of being Black and attempting to cope with the instruction offered in a school controlled by those of another background" (10). "It is not being idealistic," he writes, "to expect at least some students to be able to furnish (articulate opinions) if encouraged to do so" (10). Dànienne DeVoss and James Porter, writing in 2006 about "the new ethics of digital composition," explain that "the students in our classrooms—those who have been downloading music, burning CDs, and writing within a realm in which millions of files zip freely

across open networks on a daily basis—know a lot about this realm. They can help inform our thinking and shape our understanding, if we let them” (200). Up to this point, students’ voices have not been adequately included in the conversations that are happening about them in composition studies. We can learn from the discipline of anthropology, which has been quicker to deal with this issue.

Anthropologist Eric Luke Lassiter sees collaborative ethnography as important for the creation of new knowledge, but even more importantly, necessary to serve the needs of those being researched. For Ellen Cushman, collaborative ethnography is “activist ethnography” in that it “combines postmodern ethnographic techniques with notions of reciprocity and dialogue to insure reciprocal and mutually beneficial relations among scholars and those with whom knowledge is made” (824). Because “the researched” are equal partners in planning the ethnography, carrying it out, and writing it up, their interests are central to the project.

For our situation, it was important to have students making decisions on which texts would be examined in our collaborative essay. The text that students were most interested in and responded best to was a 1986 article named “Intertextuality and the Discourse Community” by James Porter. In that piece, Porter recommends that composition students create texts that are explicitly intertextual and contribute to the conversations of a larger discourse community (44). Writing letters to authors of articles read in class is one way of accomplishing this, according to Porter. After we took his advice and wrote letters to *him*, Porter replied by e-mail, thoughtfully addressing our comments and expressing his surprise and appreciation at receiving the letters over twenty years after having written the article to which we were responding. Concluding his remarks, he wrote, “All your students engaged the article seriously and thoughtfully. Overall, I was impressed with your students’ writing and with the level of intellectual engagement” (Personal e-mail).

Despite Porter’s praise of the students’ engagement with his work, there were times when it became clear to me that, in my effort to avoid underestimating students’ reading comprehension abilities, I overestimated them. During one particular meeting, I asked students to circulate the pages of my outline, responding to the outline itself and also to each other’s responses (see Appendix). In the outline, I had written, “Students comprehended James Porter’s text despite/because of some of the post-structural language.” Brown replied in the margin (I can tell it was him by his jagged handwriting): “Not all students comprehend.” Later on in the outline, next to my summary of

Mary Louise Pratt's "contact zones," Brown wrote "Layman's terms!" which I took to mean that he wanted me to tone down the academic jargon. Echoing Brown, consultant Jen Gargiulo underlined "congenial," "acrimonious," and "relatively equitable relationships," and commented sarcastically in the margins (I could tell it was her from the elegant, round cursive): "OK, so in simple form. . . ." She elaborated: "The reason no one commented on this section of the outline is because the words are difficult to understand."

The issue of the accessibility of scholarly texts is a controversial one in composition studies. After hearing Toby Fulwiler claim that the "exclusionary use of language by the discourse community" makes it difficult for freshmen to participate in and contribute to the conversations that are happening about them, Gary Olson, "mystified," wrote, "I certainly don't intend (theoretical) prose for eighteen-year olds. For a quarter of a century, I've been teaching that good writing is all about addressing a particular audience for a particular reason. Why in the world would I want undergraduates to 'enter' a piece that is explicitly about composition scholarship?" (qtd. in DeJoy 84).

For the most part, however, my consultants and I found composition studies texts to be accessible even when they were meant for scholarly audiences. As mentioned previously, students in this basic writing class responded particularly well to James Porter's 1986 article, "Intertextuality and the Discourse Community," in which Porter, informed by notions of "intertextuality," argues that all texts, not merely ones faithfully adhering to the principles of collaborative ethnography, are "team-written" (37). Consultant Johanna Nan summarized Porter's key point about intertextuality in a letter that she wrote to him: "When we borrow ideas from an article and sew them together with our ideas, it's creating a new discourse. . . . Sometimes we get some ideas from an article and put it together with our own ideas. This helps us a lot to write our essay." Consultant Shabeela Gobin puts it a little differently: "If someone is reading an article or a poem, and they like the idea the writer uses, they will take the idea and use it in their own writing. When they use the idea of course it cannot be the same thing, so they usually tend to expand the idea, or make it about what they are writing."

Porter uses the writing of Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence as an example. According to consultant Jen Gargiulo, he "considers Jefferson to be just as much 'an effective borrower of traces,' as 'a skilled writer.'" In other words, Jefferson borrowed concepts from his cultural landscape—"all men are created equal" (a quote from Ovid), "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (a common refrain in newspaper editorials



of the time)—and, as consultant Shabeela Gobin explains, “made it about what he was writing.”

Our class often found it useful to delineate concepts in terms of a particularly familiar item from our cultural landscape: the cell phone. Consultant Donslow Brown explains intertextuality like this: “Ideas are put together to create new and better ones, much like features of old models of phones are put together to create a brand new, up-to-date, people-attracting phone.” And consultant Dulcemaria Garcia provides a literary example of *intratextuality*: “My favorite author Gabriel Garcia Marquez wrote a book from previous stories that he had written. . . . It’s from different texts that he has written himself and he made it into another novel but added another story. (I don’t know the name of it in English.) Somehow it all intertwines and makes sense.”

Much as James Porter examined the bits and pieces of culture sewn together to create the Declaration of Independence and those sewn together to create a popular Pepsi commercial from the 1980s, our class examined a YouTube-hosted fan video by Aamir Mansoor. The video, a popular one according to consultant Stephanie Acosta, and verified by the site’s statistics which indicate 45,000 views and 172 comments, is set to Harlem-based underground hip-hop artist Immortal Technique’s track titled “Bin Laden (Remix).”

Mansoor’s “video compilation” sews together Immortal Technique’s music and his lyrics (I call them “conspiracy theories” while Acosta and a few other consultants call them “the truth”)—“Bush knocked down the towers”; “Of course Saddam Hussein had chemical weapons/We sold him that shit after Ronald Reagan’s election”; the CIA’s “tryin’ to distract the fact they engineerin’ the crack”; “This ain’t no alien conspiracy theory/this shit is real/written on the dollar underneath the Masonic seal”—with, among other things, video containing 9-11 imagery, Iraq war clips from the Abu Dhabi television network, and an enlarged picture of the “Masonic” pyramid on the back of the United States dollar bill.

In pieces like Mansoor’s fan video as well as this prose you are currently reading and the deeply remixed texts that are made possible by digital technology, how, we wondered, is it possible to properly give credit to authors? In “Why Napster Matters to Writing: Filesharing as a New Ethic of Digital Delivery,” Dànielle DeVoss and James Porter concur that the issue of credit has become more complicated:

There is . . . deep confusion as to what is “right” when using the words and works of another, what “counts” as writing when chunks of text—both text-as-code and text-as-content, not to mention myriad other creations, such as audio and video files—can be copied and digitally moved into a different context and a new document, and where the lines between one person’s work and another’s become electronically blurred through linking practices and by scripting and coding approaches. (183)

Consultant Antonio Ibanez adds, “The Internet . . . has more information being exchanged than anything else in the world. That is why most people want it to be regulated so any copyrighted materials can be protected.” Here, Ibanez indicates his familiarity with “copyright maximalists” such as the Recording Industry Association of America, but in my research I have more often encountered “copyleftists”—writers (such as DeVoss and Porter) and artists (such as Immortal Technique) who want to replace the print-based ethic with a new digital ethic.

In “Rethinking Plagiarism in the Digital Age: Remixing as a Means for Economic Development?” DeVoss and Porter allow that the “new” ethic that they advocate resembles ancient rhetorical techniques such as *compilatio*: the process of collecting fragments from various sources and putting them together in a new whole. However, for DeVoss and Porter,

Composing in the digital age is different—electronic copying-and-pasting, downloading, and filesharing change the dynamic of writing. With the ubiquitous use of digital writing technologies, “plagiarism” makes sense. It is a common practice (common in print culture, too), and perhaps even a literacy skill. . . . Remixing is how individual writers and communities build common values; it is how composers achieve persuasive, creative, and parodic effects.

If remixing is such a creative, community-building practice, should we really curtail it, as copyright maximalists (including some university officials) recommend, in order to ensure that the economic interests of publishing companies and the recording industry are protected? Should we, instead, as consultant Gargiulo mockingly suggests, “put quotes around every word”? Or should we, as DeVoss and Porter do, look to the United States Constitution for guidance?

Borrowing language from the Constitution, DeVoss and Porter write

in “Why Napster Matters to Writing” that “the purpose of writing is to promote, for the common good, the progress of the sciences and useful arts; to improve society; to help people live their lives; to expand their knowledge, to excite their imagination, to ease their anxieties; to help them live, grow, survive, and thrive,” all of which are considerably more important than rewarding an author with “prestige, credit, wealth, and fame” (197). Speaking about the future of hip-hop, “old-school” DJ the Original Jazzy Jay makes a similar point: “It ain’t about how much money I can stuff in my pockets, how many rocks I can put in my socks. It’s all about educating ourselves” (Hatch-Miller). We, as a class, seemed to be somewhat tapped into this “new digital ethic.” Garcia proposed to her fellow consultants that our project “is not about credit, it’s about experience.”

But the issue of credit is one that we could not avoid in this project. Cheniese Joseph commented during one of our meetings that “remixing is . . . a great strategy to make your paper a success. Reason being you are able to collect and gather our opinions and views on the issues and that is the essential resource for the aim of your paper.” Joseph was saying that like a quilter gathering scraps of cloth for a quilt, I was gathering their thoughts and opinions to stitch them together into an essay. Her remark indicates her awareness that the essay was, in a lot of ways, “mine” and implies that I was the one who stood to benefit most from this project. She also felt strongly that our collaborative writing project was a distraction from much-needed ACT preparation. She wrote during one meeting that she “did not agree with the whole collaborating thing. Reason being I thought it would not be beneficial for me to pass the ACT exams.” Throughout the time that we were working on the project, Joseph was a solid contributor, but I got the very distinct feeling that she was merely trading her cooperation in the collaborative ethnography project for the ACT coaching I offered.

Consultant Joseph Elliott was unabashedly against the ethnography idea from the start (although he did manage to coin a promising alternative term for basic writers: “up-and-coming writers”). On the first day we logged on to Google Docs & Spreadsheets (an online collaborative writing tool), Elliott wrote, “If Prof. Leary wanted our help on his homework, he should of just came right out and said it!!!” He also wrote, “Honestly, I really don’t think anyone in this class will benefit from this Chris Leary project. But hey, what do I know? I failed the ACT thing too.” I asked what should happen when we tried to turn all of our scattered notes and comments into an essay, and Elliott responded, “Shit, THAT’S YOUR PROBLEM.” For Elliott and other students as well, our experiment in collaborative ethnography was a distraction from ACT preparation.

This is a message I receive pretty often from basic writing students: "Yes, we want an education, but that has to wait until we pass this damn test." One goal of this project has been to disturb—in the minds of students, myself, and also *JBW* readers—that education/test prep binary. Can the practice of collaborative ethnography, for example, prepare basic writers for a standardized test? Can test prep, meanwhile, prepare basic writers for more meaningful endeavors?

### **Test Prep: Subverting the ACT Writing Exam in Preparation for It**

I actually consider our collaborative ethnography project to have been our best form of test prep. Collaborative ethnography encourages "thick description" of situations and the integration of various types of information. It necessitates engagement with other voices. It exercises conceptual arrangement. It requires the use of both intuition and logic for organization of large granules of text. Even for a test like the ACT, which asks test-takers to write a short persuasive letter to an imaginary authority figure, these processes are, in my opinion, more important than skills emphasized in test prep books such as creating effective topic sentences.

Some interesting questions emerge when we deal more directly with ACT materials—when we cave to students' requests and "teach to the test." Must we do it with an attitude of abject resignation? Or can we align test prep with more respected process-oriented teaching practices and with more recombinant practices increasingly common in digital culture? Also, is it possible to study the test—treat it like a "souvenir of clashes and encounters between margin and center" (Denny 54)—while we study *for* it?

In our basic writing course, when we dealt directly with ACT materials, fortunately, concepts and practices encountered while creating the collaborative ethnography—collaboration, dialogism, intersubjectivity, intertextuality, remix, recontextualization, among others—crept in and guided us to a "queered" version of test prep, aimed at demystification, awareness of contingency, parody, collaboration, and play. Our approach has been validated—albeit very circumstantially—in that ten out of sixteen students in this particular section of City Tech's developmental writing course passed the ACT Writing exam in the Fall of 2006. This is a very high ratio, the highest I've encountered in three years of teaching the course. Many jumped from 4 out of 12 to a passing score of 7. Those who did not pass scored a 6 and are positioned to pass following their completion of EG 092, the next level of basic writing at City Tech.

Harry Denny's article "Queering the Writing Center," which "offers queer theory as one among many critical voices that shape and analyze writing center work" (42) recommends approaches for one-to-one instruction in writing centers, but his recommendations are useful also for instructors of basic writing, especially since basic writing courses and writing centers tend to be filled with students with similar marginal status. He draws on discussions of "passing" by queer people or people of color, explaining that tutors often play the role of teaching marginalized writers how to "pass" in academic settings.

Denny's discussion of "passing" can illuminate our thinking about basic writing classes, where "passing," "pass rates," and "strategies for passing" are on everyone's mind. Students from the margins, Denny argues, already have many of the tools they need to pass. They are already equipped with "mechanisms to cope with forces of domination," and they have plenty of practice "navigating public spaces beyond the safe confines of home and community . . . yet tutors and other writing center professionals often do not tap these students' own innate and cultural literacies as resources for aiding their academic work" (49). Needless to say, basic writing instructors often don't either.

Denny's recommendations appealed to me partly because, as an instructor of basic writing, I am too often presented, and I too often present myself, with the idea that I must either help marginalized students conform to dominant discourses or help marginalized students resist them. (Or help them resist on Mondays and Thursdays and then help them conform on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.) Denny's article recommends a third way: to foster students' development of relationships with academic discourse.

What follows are a few ACT exercises that are intended to turn the gaze back at the assessment tool as well as to foster the development of a relationship with the test and with ACT-style writing, not necessarily by conforming to it or resisting it but by exploring creative ways to experiment and play with it.

Those unfamiliar with the exam should know that it presents writers with a fictional situation in their community or school and asks them to write a persuasive letter in support of one of two proposals. One prompt explains that money has been made available for the rejuvenation of a vacant lot. The writer needs to choose between turning the lot into a basketball court or a community garden.

- **ACT remixes.** All of the students’ responses (to the same prompt) are placed into the same Microsoft Word document and jumbled. Students select whichever paragraphs they like and stitch them together, making necessary adjustments. Sometimes one or more of their own paragraphs will be included in their composition, sometimes not.
- **Collaborative ACT response.** As a group, we compose a response to an ACT prompt. I write what students tell me to write on the blackboard, word by word, sentence by sentence. Pulling together all of the subjectivities in the classroom, we create an ACT response that is much more than the sum of its parts.
- **The 25-paragraph ACT letter.** A mutant offshoot of the 5-paragraph ACT letter is the 5<sup>2</sup> paragraph letter. All of the students’ responses (to the same prompt) are placed in the same Microsoft Word document. Each student creates an excessively long letter by choosing one introduction, one conclusion, and twenty-three body paragraphs. Each student arranges the paragraphs as he or she likes, making the necessary adjustments so that the paragraphs, whenever possible, “dovetail.” Section headings are recommended.
- **Hypertextual ACT responses.** Students write their ACT responses in a weblog (or copy and paste their ACT remixes into a weblog) and litter them with links to relevant websites such as <<http://www.mindspring.com/~communitygardens/>> (Parham).
- **Selectively blacked-out ACT prompts.** This exercise is adapted from Austin Kleon’s newspaper blackouts (< <http://www.austinkleon.com/?cat=31>>). Grab a Sharpie. Find an ACT prompt. Start crossing out words, leaving the words you like. Pretty soon you’ll have a poem.
- **The prompt line-up.** As Denny explains, “For mainstream society, ways of knowing seem natural, but their very contingency becomes apparent when their assumptions come into proximity to others marked by racial, gender, class, sexual, national and other forms of difference“ (47). This exercise, by putting the ACT prompt in the proximity of other prompts from different times and places, highlights its contingency. Students use writing prompts from THEA (Texas Higher Education Assessment), Qing Dynasty civil service exams (You 152), prompts for the New

York State Regents exams, and any others we find. They rate the prompts from best to worst, arrange them by date, or splice them together into one “master prompt.”

Although, again, it is impossible to draw generalizations from one semester of work with only eighteen students, my experience suggests that it is possible for basic writing students to participate in writing projects that help them, not only to pass their standardized tests, but also to engage in “creative living,” defined by Nancy Welch as “fuller cultural participation, a lifelong questioning of and play with individual beliefs and cultural forms” (60). At the same time, students continue developing ways of thinking that they can capitalize on in fields like computer science, English studies, art, and design. The emergence of open-source software, collaborative ethnography, wearable technology, fan fiction, and writing centers indicates that these and other fields are moving ever further in the directions indicated by Gibson and Eno: toward unstable, unfixed, open texts.

In this environment, even test prep can be unmoored and resituated. Just as we do with texts, images, and materials, we can keep recontextualizing test prep until we like what it means and what it does.

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## APPENDIX

### Consultants' Annotations on an Early Outline of the Paper

I agree there is no such thing as a "new statement"; what we say, do or write have been influenced by others.

we never know if we are plagiarizing because everything we may write comes from someone else.

I often wonder, those so called inventors in early centuries where did they get their work from. If we say "nobody creates something out of nothing" where did theirs work come from.

-I feel the same way there no such thing as a new statement we have some ideas a thought as other people.

Plagiarism will never die! Period! I agree

statements taken from someone else's work word for word. If Prof.

Leary chooses he can steal our ideas and use them through his own

wording. Every idea has already been used. Think about it. There's

no such thing as a "new statement".

(3) I don't think working on an assignment like this is plagiarism at all

because were all aware that our words will be used to prepare an

essay. We are all collaborating on this so that it can at some point

become one. The final product is a result of many different voices

and opinions. In any case plagiarism can never really be avoided

because someone at some point said what were all trying to say in

different ways. Most of the time we want to avoid from repeating

other peoples words but there's only so many ways we can express

ourselves on issues that are given to us on a daily basis, whether its

in our writing class or society in general. (Acosta)

(4) This essay might "wrestle" with the issue of being copied or

plagiarized, but it depends on how you present it. We are just

incorporating our opinions about the same topics the essay is being

written on. I don't see that as plagiarizing or copying others peoples

thoughts into your essay. I see it as joining other people's views to

back up the point trying to be made. I think that's more effective in

an essay then only having one point of view (which is your own).

The future is a statement

Yes that is true but somebody still came up with something. I agree, it's not plagiarism. Plagiarism is collaborating.

Strange, but true. I often feel like plagiarism can never be avoided.

you can't avoid plagiarism but you can grow from it.

No you can't. We all seem to agree.

Plagiarism is a faulty concept. That needs to be re-thought.

Yes, plagiarism is almost everything and I feel it should be rethought in any thing.